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## PERFORMER PROFILE:

### **George Hicks, Walter Pasciak and Robert Jackson –*The Blind Beat Dancers* – It's Not Just the Same Old Song and Dance!**

The Blind Beat Dancers are Creative Arts Festival favorites. Over the years the group has seen its members come and go, but George Hicks, Walter Pasciak and Robert Jackson – the group's current performers – have consistently managed to boogie their way into first place wins and repeated invitations to the Festival. They've graced the stage as a trio since 1997 showing off their skills with the Mississippi Mudslide, the Hand Jive, and this year in honor of the Festival's location – the Dakota Twist.

George Hicks, a 59-year-old Army veteran from Warfield, Va., is one of the founding members of the dance group. He was drafted into the service in 1969 and worked for the Army Intelligence Agency during the Vietnam War until his discharge in 1972. Hicks worked for a liquor distributor, specializing in wines for 15 years. Then in 1989, Hicks' globe in his left eye was lacerated during a severe car accident. He lost his left eye, but six months after the accident, his right eye suffered from sympathetic ophthalmia – a rare case when one eye loses sight because of traumatic injury to the other. While Hicks can still see shadows and silhouettes, he says that his loss of sight hasn't affected his enthusiasm.



He first heard about the Festival through rehabilitation at the VA medical facility in Baltimore. There, Hicks began to meet every week with members of the Blinded Veterans Association (BVA). Carla Carmichael, a recreation therapist at the Baltimore medical center encouraged the BVA support group to do something active. "Carla said we should get up and get moving," Hicks recalls. "I used to dance as a kid and I was really excited about getting back into it. Even though my eyesight is poor, it's still so much fun." The original group's first entry was the Hand Jive, performed at the 1997 Festival in Tomah, Wisconsin. "I was scared to be on stage at my first Festival," he now says. "Then I thought to myself, 'what am I afraid of? I can't even see all those people in the audience!'" Each year, the Festival gets better and better for Hicks. "I look forward to those feelings of camaraderie and creating something new each year for my fellow veterans." Although he is now retired, he volunteers at the VA medical center in Baltimore as vice president of the Delaware, Maryland, D.C., and Virginia groups of the Blinded Veterans Association.

Walter Pasciak joined the Blind Beat Dancers when he started experiencing the effects of macular degeneration in 1996. Pasciak, an 81-year-old Army veteran from Lutherville, Md., joined the 80<sup>th</sup> infantry over 50 years before. He was stationed in southern England and France during World War II and earned a number of service medals including the bronze and silver stars. In 2004, he was among a group of WWII veterans who traveled to France to receive the French Legion of Honor medal for helping liberate France in the summer of 1944.



## 2. PERFORMER PROFILE: THE BLIND BEAT DANCERS

Discharged from the Army in 1945, Pasciak spent his professional career in the field of social work. He is now retired but continues working as Director of Big Brother/Big Sister in Baltimore.

Pasciak first heard about the Festival through Sonya Morris, a social worker at the VA Maryland Health Care System in Baltimore. Although he had never danced more than one song at his own wedding, Morris continued to encourage Pasciak to join the Blind Beat Dancers. "Dancing is great therapy," he says now. "It's an outlet you might not have otherwise thought of to really relax and let the stress go."

Robert Jackson is the third member of this talented dancing trio. This 61-year-old Air Force veteran from Lorain, Ohio enlisted in 1964, first serving as an air policeman and then in personnel. Jackson traveled the world during his 22 years of service. In 1968, while stationed in Japan, he and four other soldiers formed their own rock band called "MGB." Together, the five traveled all over Japan performing on other bases. He also spent an extended amount of time in Germany where he met his wife Rebecca, also an Air Force veteran. In 1986, Jackson retired and returned to the states, settling in Odenton, Md. Although Jackson had experienced previous eyesight problems, in 1987 they began to escalate. The optic nerve in one eye had begun to deteriorate, leading Jackson to seek treatment at the VA facility in Baltimore. There, he was introduced to the *Visual Impairment Services Team* which offered a support group for the visually impaired and subsequently, the Blind Beat Dancers. "I've always liked to dance," says Jackson. "Just because I can't see doesn't mean I can't dance." Jackson, like his fellow Blind Beat Dancers, was also a bit apprehensive about attending his first Creative Arts Festival. "I was scared at first because I didn't really know what to expect," he reflects. "I had always liked performing, and soon I felt more comfortable. Eventually, I realized I was in heaven!"

All three of these talented individuals are excited about performing at this year's Festival in Rapid City, South Dakota in October 2006. Even though they've attended many times before, each Festival is special in its own right. "We just love coming back each year and performing for our fellow veterans," said Jackson. Pasciak, on the other hand, has a different opinion as to why the trio is invited each year. "I think the real reason they keep inviting us back to the Festival is because they just want to see three blind guys do something together and not bump into one and other," he joked.